

Isaiah 5

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October 7, 2007

The function of chapter 5 in the wider literary context of chapters 1–12.

Ch. 1: Introduction to the book of Isaiah

Chs. 2–4: A contrast of what Israel is called to be (or to become) versus what she is like now

Ch. 5: A judgment of Israel's present evil

Ch. 6: The commissioning of the prophet to preach a message of hardening

Ch. 7–8: The actual hardening of Judah and the pronouncement of future judgment

[1–7]

- v. 1a: The word “beloved” and the mentioning of vineyard give the impression of a love song.
- vv. 1b–2a speak of the toil and care invested in the vineyard.
- v. 2b carries a sudden change of tone that expresses great disappointment.
- vv. 3–4 invite Judah to offer a verdict.
- vv. 5–6a: Judgment is pronounced on the vineyard.
- v. 6b: The identity of the vineyard owner is subtly revealed.
- v. 7: The intended interpretation of the parable is made explicit.
- The parable follows the same pattern as the one employed by Nathan to confront David (2 Samuel 12:1–7).
- The *fruit* expected of Israel is justice and righteousness. Called to be a covenant people, Israel is supposed to live out her vocation as a nation of priesthood, making the goodness of God known to the nations (Exodus 19:4–6). To this end, she is expected to build a society of justice according to the design of God as outlined in the Law of Moses. Yet, the vineyard failed to bear the fruit God expected of her. “And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.”

- This song is one of the origins of the imagery of “vineyard” and “fruit” found in the New Testament (Matthew 21:33–46; John 15:1–11). The exegetical key for these NT passages is to recognize that the “fruit” expected of God’s people is justice and righteousness.

[8–30]

- This passage presents 6 woe oracles. A 7th woe is found in Chapter 6, when Isaiah pronounces judgment on himself as he encounters the King, the Lord Almighty (6:5).
- The word “woe” is a lament as well as a threat.
- Here we focus on the 6 woes, reflecting upon what cause man to lose sight of justice. The judgments will not be discussed in details unless they add to our understanding of the woes.

Woe #1: v. 8

- Out of greed, lands are acquired and developed by the wealthy till the poor are utterly driven out of their lands.
- In our society, economic considerations have become the most determining factor of policy and business decisions. “I am a business man, of course I think *only* in terms of profits.” From the perspective of profit maximization, this may sound unobjectionable. Yet to these people God pronounces judgment. As the people of God, our considerations can never be solely driven by profits and economics. Justice is always an important if not the only important consideration.
- **Reflection:** How often do you pretend to be blind to the potential sufferings caused by your actions to the poor and the oppressed, and rationalize your deeds by the cliché of profit maximization?

Woe #2: vv. 11–12

- The hedonistic life style of the wealthy leave them no room to reflect upon God’s deeds in history.
- A man’s heart does not have much room. Once you fill it with self-serving thoughts, your mind will not think about the will of God and the needs of others.
- **Reflection:** Do I leave myself enough mental room to discern what God has been doing in history? Or am I so absorbed with my personal fulfillment that I can no longer discern whether God is calling me to join Him in serving this world?

Woe #3: vv. 18–19

- The proud dare God to manifest His way. This is likely a cynical response to the accusation of v. 12.
- To them God is absent from history.
- **Reflection:** Do you truly *fear* God?

Woe #4: v. 20

- Telling right from wrong is easy until there is a conflict of interest.
- **Reflection:** When your interests are on the line, will you maintain objectivity and call good and evil by their right names?

Woe #5: v. 21

- When there is a “need” to call evil good and good evil, man will invent ingenious “theories” to rationalize their self-deceiving lies.
- **Reflection:** Do you genuinely submit to the authority of the scripture, allowing it to be your guide even if secular wisdom tells you otherwise?

Woe #6: vv. 22–23

- “Heroes” and “champions” are commonly used for describing brave and honorable leaders of a nation.
- Yet the “heroes” and “champions” of Judah are but wine drinkers and drink mixers.
- Such corrupted leaders abuse their power by acquitting the guilty and denying justice to the innocent, and do so when someone is willing to name the right price.
- **Reflection:** What kind of heroes are worshiped in our society? Who are your heroes?

Summary.

- v. 24b offers a blanket summary of all the woes: Judah has “rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.”
- By cultivating injustice, by serving oneself rather than the poor and the oppressed, Judah leads a life style that runs directly against the spirit of the Law of Moses, and despises the word of the holy God.

The price of peace and prosperity.

- Recall the years of peace and prosperity during the early reign of Uzziah.
- In fact, the reign of Uzziah is considered to be a golden era in the history of Israel (2 Chronicles 26).
- Yet, it is to a generation who grows up in a peaceful and prosperous era that God pronounces woes and judgments.

Reading assignment. Read the oracle against Israel in Isaiah 9:8–10:4. Note the similarity in phraseology and motif between this oracle and Isaiah 5.